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The Taste of Apples and Hard-Boiled Eggs

Jenna Barnett

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Aye Sae liked peeing off of high places. The higher the better. If he peed off the slide he could watch it change the color of the playground sand. If he peed off the wooden bouncy bridge he could see how many spider webs he could destroy in five seconds. Once, when I finally got him to pee in the restroom, I turned around to see him standing on the toilet bowl, giggling himself almost off the ledge, amused and proud of the thunderous splash he was creating.

Aye Sae was the first small child I ever babysat. He was born in a refugee camp in Thailand, and he would start pre-school in Atlanta in September. Childcare was one of my main responsibilities at Jubilee Partners, a Christian Service Community which seeks to help the most vulnerable refugees: those who don't know English and those who are sick. The rest of my time was spent tending to the organic garden, teaching English to adult refugees, and rounding up incorrigible goats.

Watching Aye Sae was the most challenging task of all. He continuously talked to me in Karen: sometimes commands, sometimes jokes. He must have known I couldn't understand. Eventually I just started responding in English, which pleased him. We were amused and we filled the silence. The only English word I ever heard him say was "apple," which was always a command. Do you want me to read you a book? Apple. Don't make me call your mom. Apple. You already ate all the apples. Apple.

Aye Sae's parents, Ler Paw and Thong Toe, composed half of my class. Ler Paw's English was not much better than her son's. The English she knew usually came in commands too: "Teacher, no." "Yes, Teacher." "Teacher, write." "Teacher, come."

On her last week of class, "Teacher, eat." So I went to her cabin for lunch. She gave me a Fanta which I put in my purse. That would be the ninth soda I had collected that summer at refugee houses and cabins. From the freezer she retrieved a gallon bucket of vanilla ice cream and two spoons. The ice cream had melted, re-frozen, and accumulated specks of red and green, which I pretended were sprinkles and ate.

I looked up from the ice cream and asked, "How are you?" The refugees

hadn't yet learned that when Americans ask this, we don't want the answer, we want the script. But I think I meant it this time.

She stuck her spoon in the ice cream, looked up and said, "Teacher, scared."

She told me, in much fewer words, that she loves Jubilee, that she loves blueberries, she loves the garden, and the church service and that she "no love" her trip to Atlanta. The ice cream melted again.

I didn't know what to say. I was scared too. Her husband had PTSD and would have a hard time working. With her lack of English she would have a hard time finding a job. I focused on that. The next day I taught the students how to fill out forms and job applications. Thong Toe skipped class again.

I only had two students in class that day: Ler Paw and Rae Paw, a much older Karen woman. They struggled with remembering their social security number and how to spell the names of their children. For "work experience" I taught Ler Paw how to write, "seamstress" and "gardener." She was so pleased that this mattered enough to write down. She beamed and said the words out loud, "Seamstruss" she said, holding the "ss" and her chin in the air.

Ten minutes later, after break, both of them had forgotten how to spell and pronounce these words. I was frustrated and they could tell. I taught them a new word, "memorize." I said, "When you memorize something you just know it by heart." I pointed to my heart. "You don't even have to look it up," I said, shaking my head and closing the notebooks in front of them. "It is here," I touched my head— "forever." I told them to memorize how to fill out the form by class tomorrow, Ler Paw's second to last day at Jubilee.

And they did. The next day, both Rae Paw and Ler Paw had memorized every word. Thong Toe skipped class again.

Ler Paw was right to be scared about leaving Jubilee. A week before her family left I confronted Thong Toe about his chronic truancy. He told me he was sad and scared. He already had friends and cousins in Atlanta. "Good!" I said. "No" he said. "They alcohol a lot. They make me alcohol, and I don't want."

You should have seen the way he stared through things. I knew in those moments he was either on the frontline in Thailand, battling the Burmese, or already in Atlanta on his cousin's back porch—either in the past or trying recklessly to forget it.

It's hard to leave community. It was hard for them to leave their community at MaeLa camp in Thailand, even if they were starving in every other way. It was hard for them to leave Jubilee. America, I'm afraid to say, wasn't what we showed them. It wasn't all sunshine and community, hymns and soccer. This was bad news for them and bad news for me.

The staff at Jubilee Partners has to get used to saying goodbye—an act that gets harder when you live, garden, eat, and worship with the people you send off. That's probably why we hold hands before loading up the van. We say kind words, which the refugee families understand in tone but not diction, and sing the parting prayer.

Ler Paw's family cried and gave each of us the now traditional goodbye breakfast of one banana and one hard-boiled egg. I shook Thong Toe's hand. He blinked away tears. I hugged Ler Paw and told her I would miss her. She said, "Teacher, thank you, beautiful teacher." Then ran into the van. Ten seconds later she ran back out and grabbed both of my hands.

"Teacher, come."

"Please, teacher." Commands with tears.

"I can't," I said.

"I have to take Nestorine's family to the zoo."

I have to finish college.

I only have one week left here.

I'm scared, too.

I don't want to leave either.

Rae Paw hurried over to us. Standing five feet tall, you would not expect

her to be someone who would command attention. But it was her smile that did it—disproportionately larger than any part of her body, her smile commanded happiness first and attention more as a bi-product. Still, it seemed odd to me that she would smile at this time. She reached up, putting one hand on Ler Paw's shoulder, and the other on mine. "Jenna, memorize Ler Paw. Promise. Memorize her."

I promised, and I have.